

Painting Chapter 4



Neoclassicism and Romanticism

Neoclassicism

Neoclassicism was a widespread and influential movement in painting and the other visual arts that began in the 1760s, reached its height in the 1780s and '90s, and lasted until the 1840s and '50s. In painting it generally took the form of an emphasis on austere linear design in the depiction of classical themes and subject matter, using archaeologically correct settings and costumes.

Neoclassicism arose partly as a reaction against the sensuous and frivolously decorative Rococo style that had dominated European art from the 1720s on. But an even more profound stimulus was the new and more scientific interest in classical antiquity that arose in the 18th century. Neoclassicism was given great impetus by new archaeological discoveries, particularly the exploration and excavation of the buried Roman cities of



Herculaneum and Pompeii (the excavations of which began in 1738 and 1748, respectively). And from the second decade of the 18th century on, a number of influential publications by certain authors provided engraved views of Roman monuments and other antiquities and further quickened interest in the classical past. The new understanding distilled from these discoveries and publications in turn enabled European scholars for the first time to discern separate and distinct chronological periods in Greco-Roman art. This new sense of multiple ancient styles replaced the older, unqualified veneration of Roman art and encouraged a dawning interest in purely Greek antiquities. The German scholar Johann Joachim Winckelmann's writings were especially influential in this regard. Winckelmann saw in Greek sculpture "a noble simplicity and quiet grandeur" and called for artists to imitate Greek art. He claimed that in doing so such artists would obtain idealized depictions of natural forms that had been stripped of all transitory and individualistic aspects, and their images would thus attain a universal and archetypal significance.

Neoclassicism as manifested in painting was initially not stylistically distinct from the French Rococo and other styles that had preceded it. This was partly because, whereas it was possible for architecture and sculpture to be modeled on prototypes in these media that had actually survived from classical antiquity, those few classical paintings that had survived were minor or merely ornamental works—until, that is, the discoveries made at Herculaneum and Pompeii. The earliest Neoclassical painters were Joseph-Marie Vien, Anton Raphael Mengs, Pompeo Batoni, Angelica Kauffmann, and Gavin Hamilton; these artists were active during the 1750s, '60s, and '70s. Each of these painters, though they may have used poses and figural arrangements from ancient sculptures and vase paintings, was strongly influenced by preceding stylistic trends.

A more rigorously Neoclassical painting style arose in France in the 1780s under the leadership of Jacques-Louis David. He and his contemporary Jean-François-Pierre Peyron were interested in narrative painting rather than the ideal grace that fascinated earlier Neo-classicists. Just before and during the French Revolution, these and other painters adopted stirring moral subject matter from Roman history and celebrated the values of simplicity, austerity, heroism, and stoic virtue that were traditionally associated with the Roman Republic, thus drawing parallels between that time and the contemporary struggle for liberty in France. David's history paintings of the “Oath of the Horatii” (1784; Louvre, Paris) and “Lictors Bringing to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons” (1789; Louvre) display a gravity and decorum deriving from classical tragedy, a certain

rhetorical quality of gesture, and patterns of drapery influenced by ancient sculpture.

To some extent these elements were anticipated by British and American artists such as Hamilton and West, but in David's works the dramatic confrontations of the figures are



starker and in clearer profile on the same plane, the setting is more monumental, and the diagonal compositional movements, large groupings of figures, and turbulent draperies of the Baroque have been almost entirely replaced. This style was ruthlessly austere and uncompromising, and it is not surprising that it came to be associated with the French Revolution (in which David actively participated).

Neoclassicism as generally manifested in European painting by the 1790s emphasized the qualities of outline and linear design over those of color, atmosphere, and effects of light. Widely disseminated engravings of classical sculptures and Greek vase paintings helped determine this bias, which is clearly seen in the outline illustrations made by the British sculptor John Flaxman in the 1790s for editions of the works of Homer, Aeschylus, and Dante. These illustrations are notable for their drastic and powerful simplification of the human body, their denial of pictorial space, and their minimal stage setting. This austere linearity when depicting the human form was adopted by many other British figural artists, including the Swiss-born Henry Fuseli and William Blake, among others.

Neoclassical painters attached great importance to depicting the costumes, settings, and details of their classical subject matter with as much historical accuracy as possible. This worked well enough when illustrating an incident found in the pages of Homer, but it raised the question of whether a modern hero or famous person should be portrayed in classical or contemporary dress. This issue was never satisfactorily resolved, except perhaps in David's brilliantly evocative portraits of sitters wearing the then-fashionable antique garb, as in his "Portrait of Madame Récamier" (1800; Louvre).

Classical history and mythology provided a large part of the subject matter of neoclassical works. The poetry of Homer, Virgil, and Ovid, the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, and history recorded by Pliny, Plutarch, Tacitus, and Livy provided the bulk of classical sources, but the most important single source was Homer. To this general literary emphasis was added a growing interest in medieval sources, such as the pseudo-Celtic poetry of Ossian, as well as incidents from medieval history, the works of Dante, and an admiration for medieval art itself in the persons of Giotto, Fra Angelico, and others. Indeed, the Neoclassicists differed strikingly from their academic predecessors in their admiration of Gothic, and they contributed notably to the positive reevaluation of such art.

Finally, it should be noted that Neoclassicism coexisted throughout much of its later development with the seemingly obverse and opposite tendency of Romanticism. But far from being distinct and separate, these two styles intermingled with each other in complex ways; many ostensibly neoclassical paintings show Romantic tendencies, and vice versa. This contradictory situation is strikingly evident in the works of the last great neoclassical painter, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, who painted sensuous Romantic female nudes while also turning out precisely linear and rather lifeless historical paintings in the approved Neoclassical mode.

Romanticism

Romanticism is a term loosely used to designate numerous and diverse changes in the arts during a period of more than 100 years (roughly, 1760–1870), changes that were in reaction against Neoclassicism (but not necessarily the classicism of Greece and Rome) or against what is variously called the Age of Reason the Enlightenment, or 18th-century materialism. In the sense of a personal temperament Romanticism had always existed, but in the sense of an aesthetic period it signified works of art whose prime impulse and effect derived from individual rather than collective reactions. Romanticism can generally be said to have emphasized the personal, the subjective, the irrational, the imaginative, the spontaneous, the emotional, and even the visionary and

transcendental in works of art. The Romantic Movement first developed in northern Europe with a rejection of technical standards based on the classical ideal that perfection should be attained in art.

It was writers and poets who gave initial



expression to Romantic ideas; painters, while subject to similar feelings, acquired fundamental inspiration from the literature of the period. There was an increasing awareness generally of the way the various arts interacted. The Frenchman Eugène Delacroix and the German Philipp Otto Runge explored the implications of musical analogies for painting, and everywhere writers, artists, and composers could be found in close association.

Romantic critics agreed that experience of profound inner emotion was the mainspring of creation and appreciation of art. Received ideas, and especially aesthetic values sanctioned by the authority of official institutions, were distrusted, and the individual was pitted against society. The artist asserted the right to evolve his own criteria of beauty and in so doing encouraged a new concept of artistic genius. The genius whom the Romantics celebrated was

one who refused to conform, who remained defiantly independent of society, and whose chief virtues were novelty and sincerity. This sometimes led to bizarre and extravagant projects in which the intention to shock, excite, and involve struck a melodramatic, almost hysterical note that failed to convince by its very lack of restraint.

As in the literature of the period, tragic themes predominated in Romantic painting, and interest turned sharply from classical history and mythology to medieval subjects, although an interest in the primitive was sometimes common to both. The fascination with the Middle Ages combined with strong nationalist tendencies, disposing artists to a concern with the history and folklore of their own countries. At the same time they often sought themes or styles that were distant in place as well as time. Accounts of foreign travel and the literary works of Dante, Shakespeare and Byron greatly influenced painters. Study of medieval culture imbued some painters with a Christian ideal of simplicity and moral integrity.



Another feature of Romantic sensibility was awareness of the beauties of the natural world. Artists identified their personal feelings with nature's changing aspects. An almost reverential affection, animated by the belief that the divine mind was imminent in nature, engendered at times a Christian or theistic naturalism. The artist was seen as the interpreter of hidden mysteries, to which end imaginative insight must combine with absolute fidelity and sincerity. In Britain and Germany especially, the moral implications inherent in the appreciation of natural or artistic beauty tended to outweigh aesthetic considerations. Interest in transitory phenomena led painters to devote themselves to an accurate study of light and atmosphere and their effects on the landscape. Concern to preserve the spontaneity of the immediate impression brought about a revolution in painterly technique, with the rapid notation of the sketch carried into the final conception. Whether emphasizing expressive or purely visual considerations, the landscape paintings of the period display dazzling color.

Curiosity about the external world and a spirit of what might be called scientific inquiry led many painters to explore the minutiae of nature. Technological advance also excited artistic interest, though painting was affected less than architecture and the decorative arts; and the

humanitarian sympathy and generosity so vital to the Romantic spirit gradually effected reconciliation between art and life. The political and social upheavals of the 19th century involved many painters in revolutionary movements and stimulated sympathy toward the helpless and downtrodden that found most passionate and powerful expression in the works executed during and immediately after the Revolutions of 1848.



Neoclassicism/Romanticism Questions

1. When and where was Neoclassicism a movement?
2. Neoclassicism was a reaction against which movement?
3. What stimulated interest in Greco-Roman art at this time? (Name two occurrences)
4. Before this new interest in antiquities, which was considered better- Greek or Roman art? How did this view change after Neoclassicism began?
5. Johann Winkelmann claimed that artists would be able to achieve _____, if they copied Greek art.
6. Why couldn't early Neoclassical painting be completely distinct from the Rococo/Baroque styles, like sculpture and architecture?
7. Who began a new, powerful style of Neoclassicism?
8. What kind of paintings did he produce?
9. What aspects of Roman culture did he try to endow his paintings with?
10. What did he model the drapery for his figures on?
11. How are his paintings different from the Baroque?
12. How did Neoclassical painters depict the clothing of Greeks/Romans figures in their paintings?
13. How did they depict the clothing of contemporary people?
14. What provided the subject for most Neoclassical paintings?
15. What was Romanticism a reaction against?
16. Romantic paintings got their effect from what source- the public or the artist as an individual?
17. What did Romanticism emphasize?
18. Where did the Romantics get their inspiration?
19. Romantic ideas pitted two groups against each other. Who were they and how did that relationship work?
20. How did the idea of genius change during the Romantic period?
21. In the Romantic period, interest shifted from Greco-Roman cultures to medieval ones. How did that change what artists painted?
22. Describe the Romantic attitudes toward nature.